

# NEW



As our yellow cab pulls up, an erudite voice declares: "This is The Plaza, and it's 104 years old." The dapper driver of a horse-drawn carriage, taking sightseers around Central Park, is spot on: the hotel was built in 1907. And there's nowhere more stylish than this venerable grand dame of hostelries on Fifth Avenue at Central Park South.

# YORK

## Plaza-Style,

*Story and photos by Verne Maree*





Central Park boaters  
The Plaza Oak Room  
The Plaza portico

Though it's mid-March and spring has barely sprung, the weather gods have decided to bestow on New Yorkers a summer's day. Luggage dumped, we cross the road to the Park, a huge space heaving with picnickers, walkers, joggers and cyclists in bare legs and spaghetti-strings on an unseasonably hot Friday afternoon.

Thoughts of renting bikes from an outlet near the Boatshed are soon quashed by the hilliness of the terrain; our cycling has been strictly limited to Singapore's dead-flat East Coast Park. So, we find a table at a bar with a view of Boat Lake, great for people-watching over a couple of Buds as the shadows start to lengthen. The lake is a-splash with enthusiastic rowers, paths and banks teeming with sun-starved people soaking up the last rays. Tomorrow, it's forecast to snow, and it does; "crazy weather", agrees the doorman.

### The Plaza

Compared with the unprecedented sum of US\$12 million that was lavished on the original construction, the initial daily rate of \$2.50 for a single room sounds piffling. In 2005, the hotel closed for a \$400m renovation and restoration, and it's absolutely gorgeous. Those turn-of-the-century Americans were a fancy lot. In the public areas, there's a general impression of chandeliers and acres of ceiling that have been pressed, panelled, painted and gilded to within an inch of their lives.

The hotel's main restaurant – though it's not open for dinner – is the **Palm Court**, famous for its exquisite stained-glass, lead-light ceiling. Unbelievably, a staff member tells us, it was taken down by Donald Trump when he owned The Plaza in the 80s; something to do with it interfering with the aircon. Kudos to its new managers, the Fairmont hotel



group, for restoring the ceiling to its original splendour.

Previously a gentlemen's club, the richly panelled **Edwardian Room** is popular for weddings, and – when they've set up the catwalk – it's probably the poshest venue for New York's annual Fashion Week. Upstairs from the **Lobby** is the **Rose Room**, an atmospheric old space made edgy with funky lighting; live jazz or a DJ plays on certain nights of the week. Our favourite, though, is the **Oak Room**, famous for being a set for *North By North West*. The corridor approach is lined with

big, black-and-white prints of famous patrons: the Beatles, Frank Sinatra and Mia Farrow arriving for a masked ball, Jackie O striding along the slush-lined pavement outside. At a corner table with a twilight view across to Central Park we sip Californian brut rose and watch the current passing parade.

### Suite Heaven

Our suite on the top (19th) floor is exquisite in gold and cream. Its palatial bathroom boasts 18-carat gold-plated fittings; not just the taps, mind you, but also the water pipes under the wash-basins that you view from the splendour of a bath designed to accommodate a loving couple – or even a reasonably slender *ménage à trois*.

A floral motif in mosaic that trails down one wall of the bathroom and across the floor echoes the original in the grand lobby, but despite the old-world splendour

of the accommodation, it's all new; the guest rooms were completely gutted before the recent renovation. Hundreds of chandeliers were retained, happily; and in these rooms and along the guest-room corridors, they're all that remains of the original décor.

One can't get a room with a view of the Park, because those rooms now form part of The Plaza's Private Residences, which also got the original lobby. It's a bit of a shame, but the current hotel lobby is fairly impressive, too. A constant flow of tourists snap pictures of themselves and the flowers, themselves and the richly patterned floor-tiles. They also stream into the Palm Court to partake of high tea.

### Food and Shopping

We quickly pick up a breakfast bagel habit – they're just so good. **Green Cafés** are everywhere,

and we recommend the one on 44th Street at Madison, opposite Brookes Brothers. It's \$6.50 for a bagel with all the works, oozing cheese and spilling lox.

That fortifies Roy for a marathon shopping stint at **Brookes Brothers**; he loves their original button-down shirts, and even more that he gets them for US\$70 each rather than the S\$175 you have to fork out here. Meanwhile, I trawl the adjacent Fifth Avenue block. Then it's the 4, 5 and 6 subway line downtown to Fulton Street and **Century 21**, the massive top-brand outlet store. But it's Saturday, and the place is crazy-full. So we head back uptown to the iconic **Grand Central Station** and its massive **Oyster Bar**: a platter of eight fat ones for \$18, perfect with a glass of chardonnay to soothe jangled nerves.

Full marks to the *Rough Guide*: every one of its recommendations we try is brilliant, and most within walking distance of The Plaza. Starved of our favourite Greek food in Singapore, we find **Persephone** on 60th Street East for a simple yet perfect meal of mixed dips, char-grilled octopus, *horiatiki*, *gigantes* and potatoes, washed down with *retsina*. The place is packed; you need to book. It's the same the next night at **Quality Meats** on 58th Street, just behind The Plaza. Expecting a typical, old-fashioned steakhouse joint, we're surprised by a chichi eatery over two levels, where first-class waiters and sommeliers serve us great sirloins on the bone, contemporary salads and a gorgeous claret from Napa Valley.

For a dose of culinary nostalgia, head for the well-worn **Edison Hotel** on 47th Street in the heart of the theatre district. Its atmospheric 1920s lobby is a living Art Deco

The Plaza guestroom  
The Plaza Palm Court





jewel. Though the booths in the diner-style café have been serially renovated in formica and cheap leatherette over the decades and the floors covered with bland cream tiles, the walls and ceilings are still rich with their original Art Nouveau mouldings and sconces. A formidably blonde and leathery waitress earns her tip by barking at me: “A beer? You 18?” when I order Buds to go with my cheeseburger and Roy’s browned hash with poached eggs.

### Theatre and Art

Horrified by the snaking queues waiting for half-price tickets from the TKTS booth in the freezing cold of Duffy Square, off Time Square, we trek down to



the August Wilson Theater on 52nd Street to pay top dollar (\$200 each) for the matinée performance of the brilliant **Jersey Boys**. From there, it’s a short walk back to The Plaza.

*Hotel Edison  
Time Square*

The vicinity of Central Park is home to dozens of outstanding museums and art galleries. This time, I devote the best part of a day to the wonderful Metropolitan Museum of Art, an enormous place boasting vast collections of almost everything arty that you can possibly think of. This is one not to be rushed. Another favourite is MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art).

### Getting There:

Our Singapore Airlines flight left Changi around midnight on a Thursday – 13 hours to Frankfurt, a two-hour stopover then 13 hours to New York’s JFK airport, arriving around noon on Saturday. So no, it’s not the ideal weekend jaunt. But our weekend in New York City was a wonderful start to an American trip that carried on to California, from where we flew back via Tokyo. 📍